Meitei language

Meitei, or **Meetei** (also **Manipuri** /mənɪˈpʊri/;[3][4] **Meitheilon**, **Meeteilon**, **Meeʁteilon**, from *Meithei + -lon* 'language'; **Kathe**)[5] is a Sino-Tibetan language and the predominant language and lingua franca in the southeastern Himalayan state of Manipur, in northeastern India. It is the one of the official languages of the Government of India.

Meitei is the most spoken among indigenous languages in Northeast India after Assamese. In the 2011 census of India, there were 1.8 million native speakers of Meitei. Additionally, there are around 200,000 native speakers of Meitei abroad. Meiteilon is also spoken in the Northeast Indian states of Assam and Tripura and in Bangladesh and Burma (now Myanmar). It is currently classified as a vulnerable language by UNESCO.[6]

Meiteilon is a tonal language whose exact classification within Sino-Tibetan remains unclear. It has lexical resemblances to Kuki and Tangkhul Naga.[7]

It has been recognised (under the name *Manipuri*) by the Indian Union and has been included in the list of scheduled languages (included in the 8th schedule by the 71st amendment of the constitution in 1992). Meiteilon is taught as a subject up to the post-graduate level (Ph.D.) in some universities of India, apart from being a medium of instruction up to the undergraduate level in Manipur. Education in government schools is provided in Meiteilon through the eighth standard.[8]

Meitei	
Manipuri, Meitheilon, Meeteilon, Kathe	
ꯃꯤꯇꯩꯂꯣꯟ	
ꯃꯤꯇꯩꯂꯣꯟ ꯇꯦꯡ	
Region	Northeast India, Bangladesh, Myanmar
Ethnicity	Meitei and Pangal
Native speakers	1.76 million L1 speakers

Language family	Sino-Tibetan
	
	• Tibeto-Burman
	
	  • Central Tibeto-Burman languages
	
	    • **Meitei**

Early forms	Ancient Meitei (1445 BC – 17th cent. AD) • Medieval Meitei (18th – 19th cent. AD)
Dialects	Standard Meitei, Pangal, Sekmai, Andro, Kakching, Khurkhul, Moirang, Phayeng
Writing system	Ancient Meitei Meetei Mayek[1]

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	Eastern Nagari[1] Latin
Official status	
Official language in	🇮🇳 India (Manipur)
Language codes	
ISO 639-2	`mni` (https://www.loc.gov/standards/iso639-2/php/langcodes_name.php?code_ID=300)
ISO 639-3	Either: `mni` — Meiteilon `omp` — Old Manipuri
Linguist List	`omp` (http://multitree.org/codes/omp) Old Manipuri
Glottolog	`mani1292` (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/mani1292)[2]

Name

The name *Meitei* or its alternate spelling *Meithei* is preferred by many native speakers of Meitei over *Manipuri*.[9] The term is derived from the Meitei word for the language *Meitheirón* (*Meithei + -lon* 'language').[9] *Meithei* may be a compound from *mí* 'man' + *they* 'separate'.[9] This term is used by most western linguistic scholarship.[9] Meitei scholars use the term *Mei(h)tei* when writing in English and the term *Meitheirón* when writing in Meitei.[9] Chelliah (2015: 89) notes that the *Meitei* spelling has replaced the earlier *Meithei* spelling.[10]

The language (and people) is also referred to by the loconym *Manipuri*.[9] The term is derived from name of the state of Manipur.[9] *Manipur* itself has basis on Hindu epic Mahabharata, in which a shining diamond called *mani* ('jewel') in Sanskrit is thrown from the head of a snake god Vasuki, which spreads natural beauty throughout the land.[9] *Manipuri* is the official name of the language for the Indian government and is used by government institutions and non-Meitei authors.[9] The term *Manipuri* is also used to refer to the Bishnupriya and people.[9] Additionally, *Manipuri*, being a loconym, can refer to anything pertaining to Manipur state.

The term *Meetei* is used by Meitei speakers who want political autonomy from India, so-called "revivalists".[9]

Dialects

The Meitei language exhibits a degree of regional variation; however, in recent years the broadening of communication, as well as intermarriage, has caused the dialectal differences to become relatively insignificant. The only exceptions to this occurrence are the speech differences of the dialects found in Tripura, Bangladesh and Myanmar.[11] The exact number of dialects of Meitei is unknown.[12]

The three main dialects of Meitei are: Meitei proper, Loi and Pangal. Differences between these dialects are primarily characterised by the extensions of new sounds and tonal shifts. Meitei proper is considered, of the three, to be the standard variety—and is viewed as more dynamic than the other two dialects. The brief table below compares some words in these three dialects:[13]

Standard Meitei	Loi	Pangal	English translation
chaaba	chaapa	chaaba	to eat
kappa	kapma	kappa	to weep
saabiba	saapipa	saabiba	to make
thamba	thampa	thamba	to put
chuppiba	chuppipa	chuppiba	to kiss

Devi (2002)[14] compares the Imphal, Andro, Koutruk, and Kakching dialects of Meitei.

Syntax

Meetei language is an SOV language, though topics can be fronted.

Phonology

Tone

The Meitei language is a tonal language. There is a controversy over whether there are two or three tones.[15]

Segments

Meitei makes use of the following sounds:[16]

			Labial	Dental/Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Nasal			m	n		ŋ	
Plosive	**voiced**	unaspirated	b	d	dʒ	g	
		breathy-voiced	bʰ	dʰ	dʒʰ	gʰ	
	voiceless	unaspirated	p	t	tʃ	k	ʔ
		aspirated	pʰ	tʰ		kʰ	
Fricative				s			h
Flap				ɾ			
Lateral				l			
Approximant			w		j		

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Mid	e	ə	o
Low		a	

Note: the central vowel /ɐ/ is transcribed as <ə> in recent linguistic work on Meitei. However, phonetically it is never [ə], but more usually [ɐ]. It is assimilated to a following approximant: /ɐw/ = /ow/, /ɐj/ = [ej].

Phonological processes

Velar deletion

A velar deletion is noted to occur on the suffix -lək when following a syllable ending with a /k/ phoneme.[15]

Grassman's law

Meitei has a dissimilatory process similar to Grassmann's law found in Ancient Greek and Sanskrit, though occurring on the second aspirate.[17] Here, an aspirated consonant is deaspirated if preceded by an aspirated consonant (including /h/, /s/) in the previous syllable. The deaspirated consonants are then voiced between sonorants.

- /tʰin-/ ('pierce') + /-khət/ ('upward') → /tʰingət/ ('pierce upwards')
- /səŋ/ ('cow') + /kʰom/ ('udder') → /səŋgom/ ('milk')
- /hi-/ ('trim') + /-tʰok/ ('outward') → /hidok/ ('trim outwards')

Writing systems

Meitei script

Meitei has its own script, which was used until the 18th century. Its earliest use is not known. Pamheiba, the ruler of the Manipur Kingdom who introduced Hinduism, banned the use of the Meitei script and adopted the Prakrit Script. Now in schools and colleges, the Prakrit script is gradually being replaced by the Meitei script. The local organisations have played a major role in spreading awareness about their own script.

Many Meitei documents were destroyed at the beginning of the 18th century during the reign of Hindu converted King Pamheiba, under the instigation of the Bengali Hindu missionary, Shantidas Gosai.

Between 1709 and the middle of the 20th century, the Meitei language was written using the Prakrit script. During the 1940s and 1950s, Meitei scholars began campaigning to bring back the Old Meitei (Old Manipuri) alphabet. In 1976 at a writers conference, all the scholars finally agreed on a new version of the alphabet containing a number of additional letters to represent sounds not present in Meitei when the script was first developed. The current Meitei alphabet is a reconstruction of the ancient Meitei script.

Since the early 1980s, the Meitei alphabet has been taught in schools in [[Manipur

It is a syllabic alphabet in which consonants all have an inherent vowel /a/. Other vowels are written as independent letters or by using diacritical marks that are written above, below, before or after the consonant they belong to. Each letter is named after a part of the human body.

There are some texts from the Maring and Limbu tribes of Manipur, which were written in the Meitei script.

Latin script

There exists an informal, but fairly consistent practical spelling of Meitei in Latin script. This spelling is used in the transcription of personal names and place names, and it is extensively used on the internet (Facebook, blogspots, etc.). It is also found in academic publications, for the spelling of Meitei book titles and the like (examples can be seen in the References, below). This spelling, on the whole, offers a transparent, unambiguous representation of the Meitei sound system, although the tones are usually not marked. It is "practical" in the sense that it does not use extra-alphabetical symbols, and can, therefore, be produced easily on any standard keyboard. The only point of ambiguity is found in the spelling of the vowels /ɐ/ and /a/, which are usually both written "a", except when they occur before an approximant (see table below). The vowel /a/ is sometimes written as "aa" to distinguish it from /ɐ/.

IPA	Practical
/m/	m
/n/	n
/ŋ/	ng
/b/	b
/d/	d
/dʒ/	j
/g/	g
/bʰ/	bh
/dʰ/	dh
/dʒʰ/	jh
/gʰ/	gh
/p/	p
/t/	t
/tʃ/	ch
/k/	k
/ʔ/	'
/pʰ/	ph (rarely f)
/tʰ/	th
/kʰ/	kh
/s/	s or sh
/h/	h
/ɾ/	r
/l/	l
/w/	w
/j/	y
/e/	a
/ej/	ei
/ɛw/	ou
/a/	a or aa
/aj/	ai
/aw/	ao
/e/	e
/i/	i (rarely ee)
/o/	o
/oj/	oi
/u/	u (rarely oo)

/uj/	ui

Prakrit

Bangladesh and India currently use the Eastern Prakrit script.

Grammar

Number agreement

Agreement in nouns and pronouns is expressed to clarify singular and plural cases through the addition of the suffixes -khoi (for personal pronouns and human proper nouns) and -sing (for all other nouns). Verbs associated with the pluralised nouns are unaffected. Examples are demonstrated below:[18]

Noun (Meitei)	Noun (English)	Example (Meitei)	Example (English)
angaang	baby	angaang kappi	Baby cries.
angaangsing	babies	angaangsing kappi	Babies cry.

When adjectives are used to be more clear, Meitei utilises separate words and does not add a suffix to the noun. Examples are show in the chart below:[18]

Adjective (Meitei)	Adjective (English)	Example (Meitei)	Example (English)
ama	one	mi ama laak'i	A person comes.
khara	some	mi khara laak'i	Some persons come.
mayaam	many	mi mayaam laak'i	Many persons come.

Compound verbs

Compound verbs are created by combining root verbs each ending with aspect markers. While the variety of suffixes is high, all compound verbs utilise one of two:[19]

Suffix	English translation
-thok	out/ come out
-ning	To wish/ want/ desire

Aspect markers appear as suffixes that clarify verb tense and appear at the end of the compound verb. Overall, the formula to construct a compound verb becomes [root verb] + [suffix] + [aspect marker]:[19]

Language	Root verb	Suffix	Aspect marker	Combined form
Meitei	tum	-thok	-le	tumthokle
English	sleep	out/ come out	perfect aspect	has started sleeping
Meitei	tum	-ning	-le	tumningle
English	sleep	want	perfect aspect	has felt sleepy

Compound verbs can also be formed utilising both compound suffixes as well, allowing utterances such as *pithokningle* meaning "want to give out".

Number words

Numeral	Word	Etymology	Meitei Script
1	a-ma ~ a-maa		ꯑꯃꯈꯥ
2	a-ni	Proto-Tibeto-Burman *ni	ꯑꯅꯤ
3	a-húm	PTB *sum	ꯑꯍꯨꯝ
4	ma-ri	PTB *li	ꯃꯔꯤ
5	ma-ngaa	PTB *nga	ꯃꯉꯥ
6	ta-ruk	PTB *luk	ꯇꯔꯨꯛ
7	ta-ret		ꯇꯔꯦꯠ
8	ni-paan	"2-less"	ꯅꯤꯄꯥꯟ
9	maa-pan	"1-less"	ꯃꯥꯄꯟ
10	ta-raa		ꯇꯔꯥ
11	taraa-maa-thoi	"ten + 1-more"	ꯇꯔꯥꯃꯥꯊꯣꯢ
12	taraa-ni-thoi	"ten + 2-more"	ꯇꯔꯥꯅꯤꯊꯣꯢ
13	taraa-húm-doi	"ten + 3-more"	ꯇꯔꯥꯍꯨꯝꯗꯣꯢ
14	taraa-mari	"ten +4"	ꯇꯔꯥꯃꯔꯤ
15	taraa-mangaa	"ten +5"	ꯇꯔꯥꯃꯉꯥ
16	taraa-taruk	"ten +6"	ꯇꯔꯥꯇꯔꯨꯛ
17	taraa-taret	"ten +7"	ꯇꯔꯥꯇꯔꯦꯠ
18	taraa-nipaan	"ten +8"	ꯇꯔꯥꯅꯤꯄꯥꯟ
19	taraa-maapan	"ten +9"	ꯇꯔꯥꯃꯥꯄꯟ
20	kun ~ kul		ꯀꯨꯟ ~ ꯀꯨꯜ
30	*kun-taraa > kun-thraa	"twenty + ten"	ꯀꯨꯟꯇꯔꯥ
40	ni-phú	"two × score"	ꯅꯤꯐꯨ
50	yaang-khéi	"…?-half"	ꯌꯥꯡꯈꯩ
60	hum-phú	"three × score"	ꯍꯨꯝꯐꯨ
70	hum-phú-taraa	"three × score + ten"	ꯍꯨꯝꯐꯨꯇꯔꯥ
80	mari-phú	"four × score"	ꯃꯔꯤꯐꯨ
90	mari-phú-taraa	"four × score + ten"	ꯃꯔꯤꯐꯨꯇꯔꯥ
100	chaama	"hundred × one"	ꯆꯃ
200	cha-ni	"hundred × two"	ꯆꯅꯤ
300	cha-hum	"hundred × three"	ꯆꯍꯨꯝ
1000	lisíng ama	"thousand × 1"	ꯂꯤꯁꯤꯡ
10000	lisīng-taraa		ꯂꯤꯁꯤꯡꯇꯔꯥ
100000	licha		ꯂꯤꯆ

1000000	licha-taraa		ꯇꯤꯁꯦꯇꯥꯔ
10000000	leepun		ꯇꯤꯒꯥꯇ
100000000	leepun-taraa		ꯇꯤꯒꯥꯇꯇꯥꯔ
1000000000	leepot		ꯇꯤꯒꯥꯌ
10000000000	leepot-taraa		ꯇꯤꯒꯥꯌꯇꯥꯔ
100000000000	leekei		ꯇꯤꯍ
1000000000000	leekei-taraa		ꯇꯤꯍꯇꯥꯔ
10000000000000	pu-ama		ꯄꯥ ꯑꯃ

Linguistic tradition

The culture involved with the Meitei language is rooted deeply with pride and tradition based on having respect to the community elders. Young children who do not know about the tales that have been passed on from generation to generation are very rare. Regarding the history behind the ancient use of proverbs that defines the way conversation is held with the Meitei language, it is a way of expressing and telling stories and even using modern slang with old proverbs to communicate between one another.[20]

The Meitei language is known to be one of the oldest languages in northeastern India and has a lengthy 2000-year period of existence. It had its own script. The history behind the Meitei language itself comes primarily from the medieval period of northeastern India.[21]

See also

- Languages of India
- List of languages by number of native speakers in India
- List of Manipuri poets
- Sahitya Akademi Award to Manipuri Writers
- Meitei inscriptions

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External links

- Meitei Mayek (Meitei Script) (http://tabish.freeshell.org/eeyek/)

  - Manipuri/ Meitheilon: An Introduction (http://tabish.freeshell.org/eeyek/mani_intro.html)
- *Meetei Mayek* Alphabet (http://www.omniglot.com/writing/manipuri.htm)
- Learn to speak Manipuri, with the right pronunciation (http://tabish.freeshell.org/manipuri/)
- Learn Manipuri (http://www.e-pao.net/epPageExtractor.asp?src=education.Learn_Manipuri.html)
- Learn Meithei Mayek (Meithei Script) – E-Pao.net (http://www.e-pao.net/epPageSelector.asp?src=meetei_mayek_keys&ch=manipur)
- Manipuri Poetry (http://www.e-pao.net/epPageExtractor.asp?src=MeiteiMayek.meetei_mayek_Poems.html../)